

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



THE **BIG
READ**



ERNEST J. GAINES'

**A Lesson
Before Dying**



INSTITUTE of
Museum and Library
SERVICES



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS



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The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.

Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 25 years.

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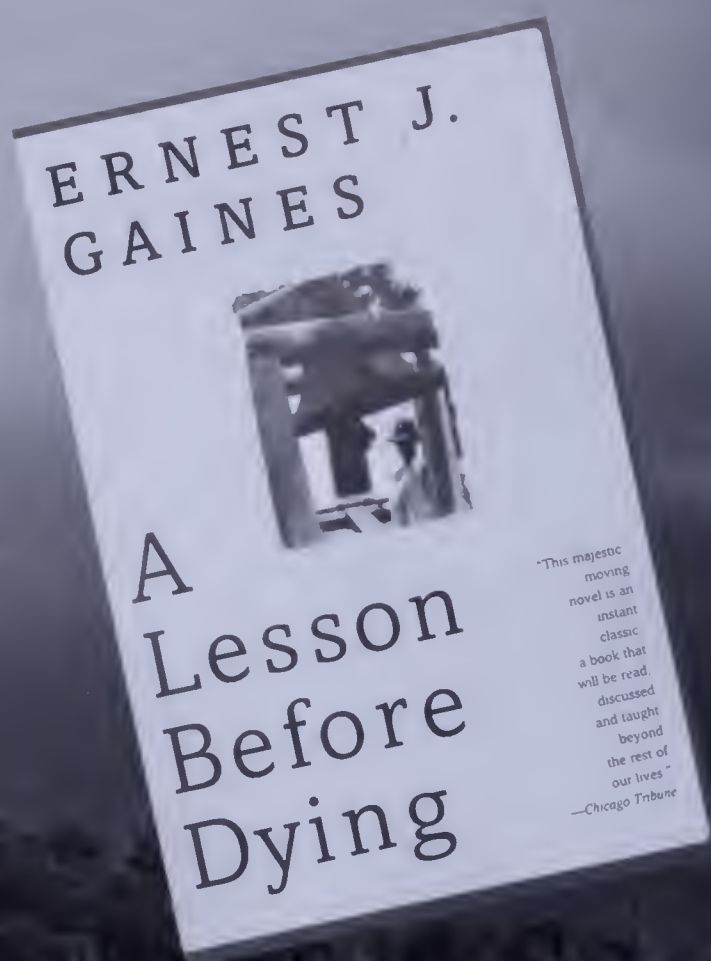
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“A low ashen sky loomed over the plantation, if not over the entire state of Louisiana. A swarm of black birds flew across the road and alighted in a pecan tree in one of the backyards to our left. The entire plantation was deadly quiet, except for the singing coming from the church up the quarter behind us.”

—from A Lesson Before Dying



Introduction

Welcome to the Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts. Designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture, the Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Ernest J. Gaines' classic novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. Each lesson has four sections: a focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, the Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why Gaines' novel remains so compelling more than a decade after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make these Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, the Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to the Big Read CD. Read Reader's Guide essays. Discuss the ways Gaines used elements of his own life to create the novel. Write about how a good novel can transcend time and place.

Homework: Chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-32).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Discuss the accuracy of Gaines' depiction of a small Southern town. Write an essay analyzing the way Henri Pichot treats Inez and Miss Emma.

Homework: Chapters 5-9 (pp. 33-74).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Explore possibilities of alternatives to first person narration. Write a brief description of the trial in either first or third person.

Homework: Chapters 10-13 (pp. 75-102).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Discuss Grant's role as the novel's protagonist, the antagonistic forces, and characters within the novel. Write a short essay on a character or situation that serves as an antagonist to Grant.

Homework: Chapters 14-17 (pp. 103-134).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Discuss the ways Gaines uses description of the scenery to evoke different moods. Write an essay on why the symbol of the "hog" affected Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Jefferson so deeply.

Homework: Chapters 18-21 (pp. 135-167).

* Page numbers refer to the June 1994 first Vintage Contemporaries Edition.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Discuss the religious symbolism in the novel. Write an essay on the symbolism of a character's name.

Homework: Read Handout Three and Chapters 22-24 (pp. 168-194).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Discuss the role of heroes in the novel and what the concept of heroism means to Grant and Jefferson. Write an essay on a female character whose actions can be considered heroic.

Homework: Chapters 25-27 (pp. 195-218).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Examine the major events of the novel as they pertain to Grant and Jefferson. Discuss the ways the lives of the two men are linked. Map a timeline. Write several paragraphs anticipating the novel's end and how the actions of Grant and Jefferson might affect the community.

Homework: Chapters 28-31 (pp. 219-256).

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Examine the themes justice, commitment, and manhood. Ask students to identify other themes.

Homework: Prepare outlines and begin essays.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel. Discuss what *A Lesson Before Dying* can teach us about the pre-civil rights South.

Homework: Finish essays.

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand a reader's understanding of a novel. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novel.

Ernest J. Gaines was born into a family of sharecroppers in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. He attended grammar school in the plantation church, and was primarily raised by his aunt. *A Lesson Before Dying* tells the story of a young black man convicted of participating in the murder of a white man and consequently sentenced to death in Louisiana in the 1940s. Although a work of fiction, this novel reflects the racial discrimination and stereotypes Gaines would have encountered in the pre-civil rights South.



Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Students should take notes as they listen. What do they learn about Ernest J. Gaines? Based on what they learned about the novel, ask them to identify ways Gaines used elements of his own life to create the world of the novel.

Copy the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Ernest J. Gaines" (pp. 4-5), and "The Pre-Civil Rights South" (pp. 6-7). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.



Writing Exercise

Gaines believes that all great writers are regional writers but that their works are universal. Ask your students to choose a favorite book. Have them write a paragraph on how a novel about a particular place can cross regional boundaries and appeal to readers who have never lived in that period or place.



Homework

Read Chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-32). Prepare your students to read three to four chapters per night in order to complete the book in ten lessons. In the novel's opening lines Grant says, "I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be." Ask your students to consider why Gaines might open the novel in this way.

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

A Lesson Before Dying is set in the 1940s, a gap between two very important eras in American history—the period of Reconstruction following the U. S. Civil War but before the Civil Rights movement began in earnest in the 1950s. The economy of the South was still primarily based on agriculture. Sharecropping—tending a portion of another person's land in exchange for a percentage of the crops—was common among both black and poor white families.

?? Discussion Activities

Copy Handout One, “Sharecropping,” and Handout Two, “The Pre-Civil Rights South,” and have your students read them in class. Gaines has said that one of the reasons he started to write was so he could memorialize the Louisiana of his boyhood and the people who lived there. On page 25, Grant describes the fictional setting of the novel:

Bayonne was a small town of about six thousand. [...] The courthouse was there; so was the jail. [...] There were two elementary schools uptown, one Catholic, one public, for whites; and the same back of town for colored. Bayonne's major industries were a cement plant, a sawmill, and a slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs.

Ask your students to locate other descriptions of the setting in Chapters 1-4. Based on what they learned from listening to the CD and reading the handouts, how accurate are Gaines' depictions of a small Southern town in the 1940s?

Writing Exercise

Many of the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* live on a former plantation that is farmed by sharecroppers. Ask students to write a one-page essay on the way Henri Pichot treats Inez and Miss Emma in Chapter 3. Does he treat them with respect? Based on what students learned from the handouts, can they understand why Inez and Miss Emma defer to him? What can we learn about the culture of 1940s Louisiana from reading their exchange?

Homework

Read Chapters 5-9 (pp. 33-74). What differences do you see between Grant's classroom and yours? How does his role as a teacher influence the way he views himself and others?

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

A Lesson Before Dying is told from the first-person point of view of Grant Wiggins, schoolteacher for the black children in the quarter. His hesitancy to become involved in the events of the novel establishes one of the major conflicts in the story—his reluctance to visit Jefferson versus his aunt’s determination for Grant to help Jefferson die with dignity.



Discussion Activities

Grant tells his aunt and Miss Emma, “Jefferson is dead. It is only a matter of weeks, maybe a couple of months—but he’s already dead. [...] And I can’t raise the dead. All I can do is try to keep the others from ending up like this—but he’s gone from us” (p. 14). Why does Grant lash out like this? How does his reluctance to help affect the way he views the situation? How do his views on his own life and teaching as a profession affect the way he tells the story?

Why do you think Gaines chose Grant as a first-person narrator rather than Tante Lou, Miss Emma, or Jefferson? How would the novel have been different if it were told from the perspective of one of these characters?



Writing Exercise

Have your students choose one of the two writing exercises below. Invite them to share their writing by reading it aloud to the class.

- Write a description of the trial from the first person point of view of one of the other characters.
- Write a description of the trial from an objective third person point view as it might be reported in the local newspaper.



Homework

Read Chapters 10-13 (pp. 75-102). Make a list of the primary characters and what motivates each of them.

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in the attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” is any character or force in a literary work that opposes the efforts of the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success. The antagonist doesn’t necessarily have to be a person. It could be nature, a social force, or an internal drive in the protagonist.



Discussion Activities

Grant Wiggins is the protagonist of the novel, but his life becomes inextricably tied to Jefferson’s. Ask your students to examine how Jefferson acts during the visit with Grant in Chapter 11 and how he later acts when Miss Emma visits, as depicted in Chapter 16. Grant tells his aunt, “He treated me the same way he treated her. He wants me to feel guilty, just as he wants her to feel guilty. Well, I’m not feeling guilty, Tante Lou. I didn’t put him there. I do everything I know how to do to keep people like him from going there” (p. 123). Why is Grant offended by Jefferson’s behavior? Does Jefferson want Miss Emma or Grant to feel guilty, or is he simply unable to cope with his fate?



Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write three paragraphs on a character other than Jefferson or a situation that serves as an antagonist to Grant. What is the conflict? How does Grant respond? Is his response appropriate? Have students support their ideas using examples from the text.



Homework

Read Chapters 14-17 (pp. 103-134). Ask your students to pay close attention to the way Grant describes the scenery during his walk with Vivian.

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers often use non-literal language to invite readers to visualize events, view internal conflicts, glimpse social themes, or grasp abstract concepts like beauty, truth, or goodness. An author uses figurative or non-literal language to stretch our imaginations, challenging us to decode the references and meanings bound within images, similes, metaphors, and symbols. Such devices require a reader to participate actively in the novel, as the reader begins to (implicitly or explicitly) interpret non-literal elements of the tale.

Gaines vividly describes the Louisiana countryside throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*. Imagery, a description that appeals to one or more of the five senses (touch, taste, smell, hearing, or sight), assists the reader in understanding the time and place where the novel is set. Imagery can also project emotion, enabling the author to imply a mood without disrupting the narrative to inform the reader of a character's emotional state.



Discussion Activities

One of the most beautiful descriptions of the plantation occurs in Chapter 14 when Grant takes Vivian on a walk down the quarter. Ask students to close their eyes while you read page 107 aloud to the class. What emotions are evoked by the images of “a low ashen sky,” “a swarm of blackbirds,” and the plantation cemetery? How does the mood change once Grant and Vivian turn on the road that leads to the field of sugarcane?



Writing Exercise

The defense attorney compares Jefferson to a hog by saying, “Why, I would just as soon put a hog in an electric chair as this” (p. 8). Have students write a few paragraphs on why that image backfired as a defense argument. What was the attorney's purpose in using that characterization? Why did the remark affect Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Jefferson so deeply? Even though Jefferson suggests it, why won't Miss Emma bring him corn to eat?



Homework

Read Chapters 18-21 (pp. 135-167). Have students pay close attention to Grant's actions during the Christmas program. As the schoolteacher, he is in charge of this event. Why is this an uncomfortable situation for Grant? How does he respond?

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to stand for a more abstract concept. A figurative meaning is attached to the object above and beyond face value. Symbols may be of two types: universal symbols that embody recognizable meanings wherever used, or symbols specific to a particular story. Found in the novel's title, at the beginning and end of the novel, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character, symbols can reveal the author's intentions or can reveal a new interpretation of the novel.

An author does not always include symbols intentionally. Sometimes, they develop organically as part of the writing process. In a 1998 interview with *Humanities* magazine, Gaines said, "Students come up now and ask me, 'Did you know you put those symbols in there?' You never think of symbols." Gaines does not intentionally insert symbols into his writing; they evolve as part of the creative process.



Discussion Activities

There is a great deal of religious symbolism in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Like Gaines, many Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Katharine Anne Porter, and Zora Neale Hurston use religious symbolism to reflect the moral ideals of a story's characters or to highlight the conflict between characters whose religious views differ. Ask your students to consider the way religion permeates the society in which Grant lives and the way it influences the actions of Vivian, Grant, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose.

Grant's classroom is in a church. How is this appropriate for his role in the black community? Does this contribute to Grant's conflict with the Reverend? Does Tante Lou expect more out of Grant as a teacher than helping children learn to read and write? If so, what?



Writing Exercise

Choose a character from the novel whose name might serve a symbolic function. Explain how the name as a symbol relates to the character. Does the person reflect or contradict the values of his or her namesake? Why might Gaines have chosen to depict the character in this way?



Homework

Copy and distribute Handout Three. Ask students to read the handout and Chapters 22-24 (pp. 168-194). Ask them to pay close attention to the scene in Chapter 24 when Grant describes a hero.

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist often undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant must teach Jefferson how to die like a man. In doing so, Grant examines his place and purpose in the community and Jefferson learns to act with dignity and pride while facing his own death.

Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Three, "Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis." What qualities did these men possess that made them cultural heroes? In Chapter 12, the old men in the bar reenact highlights of the baseball games of their hero Jackie Robinson. Grant later tells Jefferson, "A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something other men don't and can't do. He is different from other men. He is above other men" (p. 191). Ask your students to consider the rest of Grant's comments on pp. 191-194. Do they agree with his definition of a hero? Can Jefferson be the role model Grant wants him to be?

Consider the ways Grant is a hero to his students and his aunt. Does he ever disappoint them? If so, what do we learn about Grant's character in these moments?

Can small actions be considered heroic? Are there opportunities for personal heroism in the world of *A Lesson Before Dying*? If so, who are the heroes of the novel so far? Do they possess any of the same qualities as Jackie Robinson or Joe Louis?

Writing Exercise

Grant's speech to Jefferson seems to imply that only men can be heroes. Ask your students to write a brief essay on one of the women in the novel whose actions could be considered heroic. What is most admirable about her? How do her actions affect others? Do those who benefit from her actions realize it?

Homework

Read Chapters 25-27 (pp. 195-218). Ask your students to pay close attention to the scene in Chapter 25 where Grant fights with the mulatto sharecroppers. How does Grant describe the mulattoes' racism? Are his remarks about them equally racist? Ask your students to consider the ways this scene advances the plot of the novel.

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. A novel's plot follows a series of events as they lead to a dramatic climax, a tragic realization, or a happy ending. The author's timing of events from beginning to middle to end can make a novel predictable and boring, or stimulating and riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built within the tale, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

The events leading to Jefferson's execution shape the way Grant views himself and others. While Jefferson's fate is strongly foreshadowed throughout the novel, Gaines chooses to show us Grant's transformation slowly, creating tension that might not otherwise exist. In Chapter 25, Grant fights with the mulatto sharecroppers. This is a major turning point in the novel because it demonstrates how deeply Grant is affected by his relationship with Jefferson.

Grant's journey toward self-discovery defines the novel's pacing as much as Jefferson's impending execution.



Discussion Activities

Divide your class into two groups. Ask one group of students to examine the plot structure as it relates to Jefferson, the other as it relates to Grant. Students should identify the novel's major events from the perspective of the character they were assigned using passages from the novel to explain why these events are the most significant. Have each group write these events in a column on the board. Draw lines to show where Grant's and Jefferson's lives intersect. Discuss the ways each of them change during those scenes.

Divide students into groups and have them map a timeline showing the development of the plot as a whole. Students should define the events that constitute the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Groups should present their timelines, discussing any discrepancies along the way.



Writing Exercise

Ask students to anticipate the novel's ending. Have them write several paragraphs describing what will happen to Grant and Jefferson. Ask them to consider the ways the actions of these two men might affect the entire community.



Homework

Read Chapters 28-31 (pp. 219-256). During his last days in jail, Jefferson keeps a journal. Why is Sheriff Guidry concerned about how Jefferson will portray him?

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.

Use the following themes, as well as ones students identify, to determine the themes of *A Lesson Before Dying*. Which themes seem most important? Why?



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises.

Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements that *A Lesson Before Dying* makes about the following themes:

Racial Injustice: “They sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened” (p. 158).

1. Has Jefferson been treated unjustly? Would a young white man in the same situation have been punished as severely? Why or why not?
2. How have Grant, Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose suffered from racial injustice? How has each responded?

Commitment: “You hit the nail on the head there lady—commitment. Commitment to what—to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people?” (p. 29).

1. Why doesn’t Grant leave? Why did he come back after he left the first time? Why won’t Vivian support his desire for both of them to leave?
2. How does Grant explain “obligation” to Jefferson? Why does he bother? Does Grant practice his concept of obligation?

Manhood: “Do you know what his nannan wants me to do before they kill him? The public defender called him a hog, and she wants me to make him a man” (p. 39).

1. How does Miss Emma define manhood? How does Grant?
2. The final entry in Jefferson’s journal is, “good by mr wigin tell them im a man. . .” How does Jefferson define manhood?



Homework

Students should begin working on their essays. See “Essay Topics” at the end of this guide. For additional questions, see the Reader’s Guide “Discussion Questions” (pp. 14-15). Outlines are due at the end of next class.

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Novels illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives, while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.



Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? What are some of the books they consider "great?" Do any of these books remind them of *A Lesson Before Dying*?

A great novel stands the test of time and is read long after it is written. Gaines published *A Lesson Before Dying* in 1994. The novel is set in the late 1940s. Do you believe this novel will endure the test of time? Is the novel as relevant today as when it was first published? Do you think that its subject and themes will continue to be relevant? Why or why not?

Writers can become the voice of a generation or of a particular group of people. What kind of voice does Gaines provide through Grant? What can this teach us about the concerns and dreams of people of color who grew up in the pre-civil rights South?



Writing Exercise

If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Be available to assist students as they work on their essays in class. Have students partner with each other to edit outlines or rough drafts. Provide them with the characteristics of a well-written essay.



Homework

Students should work on their essays. Rough drafts are due next class. Celebrate by participating in a Big Read community event.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the “Discussion Questions” in the Reader’s Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, provided they are interesting and specific. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

Students should organize their essays around a stated thesis, argument, or idea about the novel. This statement should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should rely on references to the text.

1. Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Vivian are used to taking care of themselves and others. Explain the role of women in the novel. What was their function in this society? Was their contribution and sacrifice recognized?
2. Education is very important in this novel, both its attainment and the lack of it. Tante Lou continually refers to Grant as “the teacher.” The other men call him “Professor.” Yet Grant hates teaching, echoing the feelings of his own teacher, Matthew Antoine. Contrast the opinions of education presented in this novel. Why do some seek it and others consider it a burden? What role does it play in the characters’ lives and the life of the community?
3. Reread the description of Vivian from Chapter 4 (pp. 27-28) and the passage in Chapter 15 about Vivian’s marriage (p. 111). What was the cause of conflict between Vivian and her family over her marriage? What causes the conflict between Vivian and Tante Lou over her relationship with Grant? Why does Grant say that the conflicts are not the same, as Vivian believes?
4. Find specific examples of how Gaines uses different levels of language and non-verbal communication to make his characters realistic. How does the manner in which they speak or don’t speak enhance the story? How would the novel change if everyone spoke as Grant does, or as the older people in the quarter do? Or as Jefferson writes?
5. Grant’s fight with the mulatto sharecroppers demonstrates his anger and frustration. Why are the sharecroppers’ comments about Jefferson particularly hurtful? Would Grant have reacted in the same way if a black man had made similar comments? A white man? What might this scene teach us about the racial tensions in Louisiana in the 1940s?
6. On the morning of Jefferson’s execution, Grant leaves his classroom to stand outside, alone, to wait for news. He asks himself, “Why wasn’t I there? Why wasn’t I standing beside him? Why wasn’t my arm around him? Why?” (p. 250). Attempt to answer these questions, referring to the text of the novel for examples of Grant’s strengths or weaknesses.
7. Paul earns Grant’s respect through his treatment of Jefferson and his visitors. How is Paul different from the other jail keepers? How do his actions at the end of Jefferson’s life demonstrate Paul’s goodness? Why might he have chosen to attend the execution even though it was not part of his job? Why did he choose to drive out to the quarter to tell Grant the news personally?

Capstone Projects

These activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. **News video:** Have students script and shoot a video news segment about Jefferson's case that might appear on a national network broadcast. The segment could include any of the following: on-the-spot interviews with the two attorneys immediately after the trial verdict, an interview with Miss Emma, Mrs. Gropé, Reverend Ambrose, or an eye-witness account of the execution from Paul. Students might choose to combine several segments to make a whole program on Jefferson's case. Screen the video for the class, at an assembly, or as part of a showcase for parents.
2. **Performance:** Have students choose one or more powerful scenes from the novel to dramatize, using Gaines' dialogue and his narration as direction. Present the scenes as part of an assembly, or as part of a showcase for parents.
3. **Photo Gallery:** Create a photography exhibit using archival photos (or a combination including students' photos) to illustrate the South of the 1940s. The photos should correspond to the setting, the events, or the society portrayed in the novel. Each photo should be captioned. Students should be able to discuss the photos and explain their choices. Have students display this gallery at the school or local library.
4. **Retrospective:** Have students do further research on sports in the 1940s, especially with regard to black athletes. They should focus on the life and career of either Joe Louis or Jackie Robinson. They should include photos of the athletes, posters (either authentic or student-created), enlargements of trading cards, and either an audio or video of a boxing match or baseball game. Students may obtain a transcript of the event and present it as it would have been broadcast live. Students may choose to assume the identity of the athlete for an interview discussing his life. Students should do an in-class presentation, an in-school assembly, or a showcase for parents.
5. **Reading:** Have students read the James Joyce short story "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," mentioned in the novel. Have students summarize the story and choose to read one or two particularly meaningful passages. Have them explain why this story might be considered universal, "regardless of race, regardless of class." Explain how this story applies to the novel, citing passages that show the connection.

Sharecropping

The concept of sharecropping evolved in the South out of economic necessity. The South's main industry, farming, only operated successfully with free slave labor. After the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, the white plantation owners found themselves "land rich but cash poor," with no one to work their land and no money to hire anyone to do it. The mass exodus of former slaves to the North and the absence of any other profitable industry added to the region's woes.

Many of the freed slaves who stayed in the South knew only one vocation, farming. But they were no longer content to work for somebody; they wanted to own land and support their families. Unfortunately, none of these men had any money, nor owned the things needed to operate a successful farm. Thus, sharecropping became the norm.

Landowners, usually whites, would lease a portion of their land, along with tools, seed, fertilizer, and other necessities, to former slaves or poor whites. In return, the sharecroppers paid their debts with interest to the landowners by giving them a portion of their crops. Since the farmers had no money, plantation owners operated stores that sold needed goods, which the farmers "charged," and the bill was "paid" with another portion of the crops. Whatever portion of the crops was left over after the sharecroppers paid their bills could be sold and the profit kept. However, there was rarely any portion of the crops left over or any profit made. The farmers were obliged to continue this arrangement year after year in vain hope of getting out of debt, creating a never-ending cycle of poverty.

Many sharecropping agreements were verbal. Some of the sharecroppers actually signed written contracts, but, often illiterate, they could not read these agreements to understand that they heavily favored the landowners. Examples of this inequality can be found in samples of old contracts stipulating that the landowners or their agents could specify how the land was cultivated. In addition, those who raised cotton were required to pay to have it ginned on the plantation before turning it over to the owner.

The Freedmen's Bureau was created to regulate this system. It attempted to establish model contracts that protected sharecroppers, proposed standard payment of one-third of the crops for a year's rent, and created a council to settle disputes between landowners and sharecroppers. The sharecroppers formed organizations such as the Colored Farmers' Alliance and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to aid and support their members. The federal government established the U.S. Farm Security Administration to help stop the abuse of sharecroppers, but still it continued.

So why did freed slaves choose to stay despite such a harsh lifestyle? Sharecroppers hoped they could ultimately buy their own farms. This method of farming continued from Reconstruction until the Civil Rights Movement. Falling crop prices, continued black migration to the North after World War II, and more rights and opportunities for blacks finally destroyed this way of life, but not before it left its mark on generations struggling to survive.

Pre-Civil Rights South

Life in the pre-civil rights South offered little opportunity and denied its black citizens many of the most basic human rights. Slavery had been abolished in the Confederate States by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1870) gave all men—white and black—the right to vote. However, the Supreme Court's decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896 made segregation virtually the law of the land. In light of *Plessy*, it was not illegal to have separate facilities for black and white Americans as long as they were equal. This gave rise to the “separate but equal” notion. Unfortunately, “separate” was rarely “equal.”

In the 1940s, the decade in which *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place, the South was still governed by many of the laws enacted after Reconstruction. These statutes, known as “Jim Crow” laws, were designed to keep former slaves from achieving equality with their former masters. Louisiana, where Ernest J. Gaines was born and the novel is set, had the most such laws of any state.

Jim Crow laws prohibited miscegenation (intermarriage between different races) and made it punishable by harsh prison sentences and steep fines. Many laws made it difficult for blacks to exercise the right to vote by requiring that they pay poll taxes they could not afford or take tests they could not pass. One of the most ludicrous laws in Louisiana prohibited blind people of different races, who could not even see the color of each other's skin, to be housed and treated at separate facilities. Neither white nurses nor white barbers were

allowed to serve blacks. A black person accused of any perceived offense to a white person was subject to intimidation, violence, and possible lynching by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Jim Crow laws extended well outside the geographical area known as the “Deep South.” In Oklahoma, it was a misdemeanor for white teachers to teach at a school that accepted students of both races. Oklahoma also required separate facilities for swimming, fishing, and boating, in addition to separate phone booths. As late as 1948 even California, the state to which Grant's parents have “escaped,” had laws outlawing marriage between the races.

A Lesson Before Dying is set just before the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. In 1954 the U. S. Supreme Court ruled segregation of public schools unlawful by unanimous decision, after hearing the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery public bus to a white man. Martin Luther King, Jr. helped organize a bus boycott and was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, making him the official spokesman for the boycott. Still, another decade passed before Congress ratified the Civil Rights Act of 1964, nullifying the country's Jim Crow laws and ending legalized segregation.

Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis

Two of the greatest African-American athletes of the 20th century, Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis, are remembered not only for their groundbreaking achievements but also for personal courage that allowed them to break the race barrier in their sports a full decade before the Civil Rights Movement began in earnest. The two men were born just five years apart in the rural South, both sons of sharecroppers. Their families ultimately left the region in search of a better life.

Joe Louis Barrow was born in Alabama in 1914. After his father's death, his mother remarried, and in 1924 the family moved to Detroit. When he began boxing as a teenager, he dropped his last name. Known as "The Brown Bomber," Louis fought his two most important bouts against the same opponent, Max Schmeling, a German boxer. During their first match in June 1936, Schmeling knocked Louis out in Round 12. This first professional defeat devastated Louis and his fans, causing tears in the dressing room and riots in Harlem.

Although he beat his next opponent, "Cinderella Man" James J. Braddock, a year later and became the first black heavyweight champion, Louis longed for a rematch with Schmeling. On June 22, 1938, he got his chance. This rematch became a symbolic battle: Nazism and all Hitler stood for, against democracy and the American way of life. Louis took only 124 seconds to knock out Schmeling and become the hero of all Americans.

Jack Roosevelt Robinson was born in Georgia in 1919 but grew up in Pasadena, California. He began his sports career as a semi-professional football quarterback but later played baseball in the

Negro American League. After meeting with Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson's life and professional sports in America forever changed.

On August 28, 1945, Branch Rickey subjected Robinson to shouted racial slurs and dramatizations of demeaning situations. When Robinson proved he could handle the pressure, promising silence for three years despite the expected racial abuse, he was offered a contract to play for the Dodgers' farm team. On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the "color line" by walking onto Ebbets Field in a Dodgers uniform wearing number 42. Rookie of the Year in 1947 and National League MVP in 1949, he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, and posthumously awarded a Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Freedom. In Robinson's honor, Major League Baseball retired the number 42 from professional baseball.

In Chapter 12 of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant relates the euphoria of the men in the bar as they relive some of Jackie Robinson's greatest plays. Grant also remembers the heartbreak of Joe Louis' stunning defeat by Max Schmeling and his inspirational victory two years later. Ultimately, each man's victories—in the ring and on the baseball diamond—promised the hope of a world in which people were judged on merits and abilities rather than skin color.

Teaching Resources

Printed Resources

Eig, Jonathan. *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson's First Season*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007.

Margolick, David. *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink*. New York: Random House, 2005.

Web sites

<http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1998-07/gaines.html>
Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities. A 1998 interview conducted by Bill Ferris, then chairman of the NEH, in which writer Ernest Gaines talks about storytelling, race, and his Louisiana roots.

http://198.41.70.4/lhs/la_authors/gainesinterview.htm
An interview with Ernest Gaines conducted by students from Lafayette High School in Lafayette, Louisiana on April 21, 1998. It was part of a project on Southern authors that appeared on the web site *Louisiana Legacy: A Celebration of Literature Through Technology*.

<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/33.htm>
An article on the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case—one of the earliest desegregation cases argued before the Supreme Court. This article appears on the web site USINFO, which delivers information about current U.S. foreign policy and about American life and culture.

http://www.nps.gov/archive/malu/documents/jim_crow_laws.htm
A sampling of Jim Crow laws from various states created by the staff at the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site and posted on the National Parks Service web site.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/sharecrop/ps_delany2.html
PBS's *American Experience* series entitled "Reconstruction: The Second Civil War" includes a model contract that reveals some of the injustices typical of sharecropping arrangements.

<http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/robinson01.html>
Time magazine's "100 Most Important People of the Century" issue. Jackie Robinson was named one of the twenty people who exemplify courage, selflessness, exuberance, superhuman ability, and amazing grace.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

*This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



"In all my stories and novels, no one ever escapes Louisiana. Maybe that is because my soul never left Louisiana, although my body did go to California."

—ERNEST J. GAINES

**“Why wasn’t I there? Why
wasn’t I standing beside
him? Why wasn’t my arm
around him?...Why wasn’t
I down on my knees?”**

—ERNEST J. GAINES

Grant Wiggins in *A Lesson Before Dying*

**NATIONAL
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The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

A great nation deserves great art.

